

CHAPTEE VIII

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE LOLLARDS,

1382-1399 OXFORD. LEICESTERSHIRE. THE
WEST. LONDON

IT is pleasant to turn from dreary annals of political contest to a thing more vital, the rise among the English of an indigenous Protestantism. We have already sketched the state of the Church and of religion in England, and the doctrines which Wycliffe promulgated as a protest against what he found. We have given some account of the reception awarded to him personally, especially in the political world. But we have had little opportunity to notice the effect of his doctrinal heresies, or to calculate the degree to which he actually changed the religious beliefs of the country. We have little or no knowledge of his followers before 1382, the year *in* which persecution began. With persecution begins our knowledge of the persecuted. It is possible to collect a considerable number of facts about the Lollards of Eichard the Second's reign, to trace the methods and the area of their labours, and to estimate the degree to which the doctrines of the early Wycliffites differed from those of their master. This story is not, like the Peasants' Eising, of great dramatic interest; for in this first generation Lollardry, though fertile in missionaries, was unproductive of martyrs. But in historical importance it stands first, for it had more lasting effects than the rebellion, which only emphasised, without materially hastening, a process already at work in society.

Although Wycliffe's famous heresy respecting the Eucharist had been promulgated in 1380, if not before, and although preachers of his school, if not actually with his